



- Local**
- Transportation
- Consumer
- Education
- Elections
- Environment
- Legislature
- Joel Connelly
- Robert Jamieson
- Visitors Guide
- Obituaries
- Neighborhoods**
- Sports**
- Nation/World**
- Business**
- A&E**
- What's Happening**
- Lifestyle**
- NW Outdoors**
- Photos**
- Special Reports**

- COMMENTARY**
- Opinion**
- Columnists**
- Letters**
- David Horsey**
- Saturday Spin**
- Forums**

- COFFEE BREAK**
- Comics & Games**
- Horoscope**
- TV Listings**

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- Newspaper ads**

Scientists begin unraveling mystery of Kennewick Man

By MELANTHIA MITCHELL
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

SEATTLE -- Scientists have begun studying the 9,300-year-old remains of Kennewick Man, one of the oldest and most complete skeletons ever found in North America and the subject of a nine-year legal battle between researchers and Northwest Indian tribes.

The ancient bones have been under lock and key since 1998 at the University of Washington's Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture. A group of 11 researchers from around the country gathered there Wednesday to begin the first comprehensive study of the remains that include more than 300 bones.

The research has been fiercely opposed by four Northwest tribes - the Umatilla, Yakama, Nez Perce and Colville - which wanted the bones reburied without scientific scrutiny. They claimed they were entitled to the bones under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

"We just want this person returned so he can be properly reburied," said Debra Crosswell, a spokeswoman for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton, Ore.

In February 2004, a three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals - backing an earlier decision by a federal judge in Portland, Ore. - ruled in favor of eight anthropologists who filed a lawsuit seeking to study the remains.

With the go-ahead from the courts, archaeologists and anthropologists on Wednesday began their 10-day study by taking measurements and recording observations. They'll attempt to unravel the mystery of how Kennewick Man died and what sort of effects nature had on his bones.

None of the scientists was available for comment Wednesday, said Mary Anne Barron, a spokeswoman for the Burke Museum.

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Scientists last month took scans of the skull and the pelvis, which has a spearhead embedded in it, and created a three-dimensional picture that has been used to construct models of the bones. The models will be used for additional research and to minimize impact to the actual skeleton. Meanwhile, samples taken from fragments of the leg during government studies in 1999 and 2000 will again be analyzed in the coming months.

There'll be no public viewing or photographs taken during the exam as the bones remain closely guarded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the property along the Columbia River near Kennewick where the skeleton was discovered. A Corps representative will be on hand at all times to monitor the research.

Scientists have until July 15 to complete their study, then the bones will be returned to a "secure facility" at the Burke, said Nola Leyde, an Army Corps spokeswoman in Seattle.

"We anticipate that we'll receive other requests for study," she said, noting the Army Corps has already been asked for permission to film a documentary about Kennewick Man. No decision has been made on that request.

The bones were spotted partially submerged in water on July 28, 1996, by two college students watching hydroplane races along the banks of the Columbia.

The Army Corps originally planned to turn over the remains to local tribes for reburial, but eight scientists sued to stop it from releasing the bones.

U.S. Magistrate Judge John Jelderks in Portland, Ore., sided with scientists, as did the 9th Circuit panel, which last year ruled there was no link between the skeleton and the tribes.

And in August 2004, Jelderks ordered that any legal action in the case be limited to the government and scientists seeking study of the remains.

The Yakama, Umatilla and Nez Perce tribes have since appealed the Oregon district court's latest ruling, but a decision isn't expected until next spring, said Rob Roy Smith, a Seattle attorney for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation. He represented the four tribes during arguments before the 9th Circuit.

It's too late to stop the study, Smith said, but a favorable ruling for the tribes could give them control of what ultimately happens to the remains.

Legislation also remains under consideration in the U.S. Senate that would allow federally recognized tribes to claim ancient remains even if they cannot prove a link to a current tribe.

"What the tribes want now is just to have a seat at the table," Smith said. "They want to know what's going on. That is a right that is being denied them by both the scientists and the United States."



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101 Elliott Ave. W.
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